Possibilities for innovation: Reordering of spatio-temporal effects

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Potential: The Order of time and space in the production of media and visual effects

This paper introduces the principles of potential in design practice. It employs concepts of logical possibility and the fundamental ordering of time and space in the formation of media as well as mediated visual effects. For this reason it requires a more theoretical approach.

The first concept this paper redefines is mediation.

Carolyn Marvin argues, that "media are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication." (Marvin 8)

We should move away from the traditional artifactual notion of communication technologies with its fixations on the instrument and the instrumental in an imputed teleology, and realise that this view frequently consigns the past to a mute prehistory of current prevailing social applications of media technologies. We should rather adopt a broader view such as argued by Andy Darley which is that computer imaging has developed largely through a process of infiltrating or colonizing existing signifying practices which are already embedded in a diverse set of highly-developed cultural forms (Darley 82). "The media hybrids created as a result have collapsed the boundaries between electronic and photographic, static and moving, real and unreal" (Boddy 107) and as such should be viewed as the conglomeration of destabilised professional codes in a state of flux. Such a view of computer imaging practice allow for the possibility of defining new forms and new codes of social practice. It is with this view in mind that this paper investigates the concept of 'visual identity' and from this vantage point that it claims there is a clear potential to re-define the social practice of designing 'visual identity' solutions or forms through the practice of web design. This paper claims that it is thus possible for web design to search for and establish new 'visual identity' solutions.

This claim is supported by the epilogue of *A History of Graphic Design* written

by Phillip Meggs where he envisages the future of the discipline. He writes: "The need for clear and imaginative visual communications to relate people to their cultural, economic, and social lives has never been greater. As shapers of messages and images, graphic designers have an obligation to contribute meaningfully to a public understanding of environmental and social issues. Graphic designers have a responsibility to adapt new technology and to express their zeitgeist by inventing new forms and new ways of expressing ideas. The poster and the book, vital communications tools of the industrial revolution, will continue in the new age of electronic technology as art forms, and graphic designers will help to define and extend each new generation of electronic media." (Meggs 475)

Spatio-temporal ordering: the primary function of graphic design.

According to Meggs, the book designer William Addison Dwiggins coined the term "graphic design" to describe his activities as an individual who "brought structural order and visual form to printed communications" (Meggs xiii)

What is clear from this early definition of the concept of graphic design is that it was functioning as a discipline which produced printed artifacts. The discipline applied its techniques to a specific technology (print) and was engaged in the definition of new forms within the medium of print. It can be argued that the techniques developed by this emerging discipline where constrained by the material possibilities of the print medium and that it continued to develop new techniques as the visual representational potential of print technology changed. It can also be argued that the needs of the graphic design discipline to create new forms with diverse features influenced print technology development.

As time passed the scope of graphic design expanded beyond print design. At the time Paul Rand wrote *A Designer's Art* he made clear distinctions between the terms "graphic" and "design". Rand's approach shows a clear departure from the initial emphasis on the spatio-temporal ordering of elements in the visual forms of print by defining the function of the disciplinary practice as design in the service of graphic

communication.

Rand writes: "Design is a problem-solving activity. It provides a means of clarifying, synthesizing, and dramatizing a word, a picture, a product, or an event." (233)

It is not possible to determine what William Bowman meant when he referred to "visual education" in the following quotation, but if it can be implied that the current definition of graphic design education can be included in it, he states an important relationship between thinking, design and graphic statement.

"In practice, graphic communication encompasses a variety of independent disciplines, ranging - from technical illustration and cartography to visual education. In all of these diverse fields, graphic thinking is primary, and design is the vehicle which carries the graphic thought to its destination as a graphic statement." (Bowman vii)

Bowman clarifies the order between the terms and clearly delineates graphic thinking from graphic design. He then relates the position of the graphic statement relative to graphic design. This is a significant statement because it supports the argument this paper makes; that there can be cases where this order is followed by a graphic designer.

But what other cases or orders exist in design practice?

Possible changes in order: revealing potential for new forms in design

Consider for a moment the problem (A) on the left and the solution (B), graphic statement or object on the right, with design as a process of creative practice that separates one from the other. Also think of the possibility that what is on either side of design, can be either constant (A or B fixed or predetermined) or variable (A' or B' flexible or undetermined). Basic logic then reveals four possible combinations or states of constant and variable relationships namely; AB, AB', A'B, A'B'. It can be argued that not all of these conditions are equally represented as problems in graphic design, but it is worth analysing the conditions of possibility because they represent potential combinations or orders that can be established in the disciplinary discourses

of graphic design and web design.

This application of logic is not unique to this paper and it's analysis of possible orders in design practice. In 2000 J.P. van Leeuwen & B. de Vries presented a paper at the ECPPM 2000 Conference entitled "Modelling with Features and the formalisation of early design knowledge" in which they presented the same logical conclusion and the consequences of every case or order described here.

Considerations on the dynamic nature of design lead to the following conclusions: (van Leeuwen and de Vries 1)

Design involves creativity through combinations of these approaches:

a. Selection of an existing solution for a similar design problem. This involves matching information related to the problem and the existing solutions.

b. Creating a new solution for the design problem, involving the generation of new information that defines the solution.

c. Combining existing pieces of information in order to find new relations or structures in concepts and ideas that lead to design solutions. This involves analysis, re-interpretation, and re-structuring of existing design information.

d. Altering the design-problem in order to find a suitable solution. This means analysis, reinterpretation, and re-structuring of the information related to the problem, possibly even adding to, or dropping parts of the design problem.

The following relationships exist between their analysis and the analysis proposed above; a –> AB, b –> AB', c –> A'B' and d -> A'B.

They also argue that "(1) Design is a process of problem-solving and often concerns problems that are initially not well structured. (2) Information related to design problems and solutions is dealt with in different ways depending on the approach of solving the design problem." (van Leeuwen and de Vries 1)

If the above logic is applied to graphic design or web design; it follows that all the potential combinations of possibilities must indeed exist within each discipline. Therefore it must be possible to have four distinct orders of design and that design in each discipline involves creativity through combinations of any of these approaches

established above.

The implications of this form of analysis and logic applied to design practice are significant.

Practice: The maintainence of form

Consider case (a –> AB). This is perhaps the most commonly occurring design response in the graphic design and web design disciplines. It involves the selection of an existing solution for a similar design problem. This involves matching information related to the problem and the existing solutions. An example would be a client briefing a designer to design and as is often the case, produce a "web site". The customer has seen an established form which could be called a "corporate web site" in many examples on the Internet. The perceived value, prestige, function and usefulness of such an asset are to a certain extent established in the mind/s of the customer and there is a more or less clear expectation established a priori. The designer on the other hand has also been exposed to many such "corporate web sites" and has probably designed and/or produced such communication products (assume that this case is intended to assist corporate communication). In the mind of the designer a similar set of concepts, techniques, methods, strategies, and examples preexist. The left and right relative to the design process are thus both forms that approach stability. In such a case the act of design does not concern itself with the outside of the problem, it will deal only with what is contained on the inside (the look and feel, the content, and structure of content). The stability of the 'design problem' resists the possibility of investigating a new form of "web site". Of course there are many constants and variables in every such problem, but the design element of form is approaching stability not variability. The evidence for such solutions to such almost stable problems is to be found in a great many "corporate web sites" on the web.

Practice: The innovation as the transformation of form

If the designer is approached by a start-up company in need of a web site as

well as a 'visual identity' the complexity of the problem this paper is focused on reveals itself in a pure form. If no logo or brand visual identity exists, there is potential for both the "web site" and the visual identity to be defined at the same time and possibly by the same designer. At such a moment the order of design becomes crucial. Which disciplinary discourse will influence the design? Will the designer consider a logo design, a corporate identity, a brand or a new concept for 'visual identity'? Will the client insist on forms of 'visual identity' which are based on older and more stable forms? If a logo is designed, will it be static or dynamic? What will the designer think of as the first application of the logo? Will the designer consider the business card or the web site to be the primary medium for application of this component in the 'visual identity'? Will the web site be considered as electronic paper or a room? What is the content the customer wants to communicate? What role will the "web site" play in the communication, sales, order fulfillment, support and relationship building strategies of the new company? The list of questions can expand almost infinitely.

The questions related to order are of specific interest to this study. What impact will it have if the designer considers the "web site" as a place? How will it affect the design if the logo is considered obsolete and some other form of 'visual identity' is conceptualised? Is the designer free to make such choices?

In "Practice: the maintenance of form" the idea of formal stability and disciplinary discourse was considered. It was shown how it is possible and indeed desirable, from one point of view, to stabilise norm and form. Here the question of potential for the invention of new form is reconsidered. Under what conditions will it be possible for the designer to be free to explore such possibilities? Indeed under what conditions will the web designer be free to explore the potential of the 'multimedia web' available to their design practice?

At this point it is appropriate to introduce the second case of order in design suggested by van Leeuwen and de Vries. Case (b –> AB'). Creating a new solution for the design problem, involving the generation of new information that defines the

solution. This order of design practice is more often found in the personal expression of competent web designers. It is characterised by experimental forms unfettered by corporate communication norms and 'visual identity' specifications. Designers who introduce new solutions for 'visual identity' consider this an act of self expression; some may even see it as "a designer's art". This is the order of design which Paul Rand campaigned for in his book of the same title. It is an order of design which considers the "materials" available to achieve the purpose of visual communication and places it at a higher priority than conformity because of the change in the fundamental order it considers. The change in this order in comparison to the first case considered is that the form (B') on the right of the equation is now variable and is no longer based on a constant (B). The concept of converting constants into variables and variables into constants was also advocated by Bruce Mau (2000). Mau's contribution to the concept of 'potential' in design is significant and covers a much broader scope than the focus of this study. Case (b) in the order of design is also evident the design practice of his studio, but all the other modes of design are as well represented. The fact that Mau questions the existence of graphic design as a discipline is evidence that his design practice uses broader terms of reference and applies all the base orders of design individually and in combination while constantly seeking to invent new form. An example of the order represented by case (b) in Mau's work is the Logo design for The Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi). NAi is an architecture design firm in the Netherlands with a diverse range of services. Mau's solution for their 'visual identity' was to create 100 logos with 1000 colours. The questions Mau's team asked when designing the 'visual identity' are indicative of this order of design. "Is it possible for a visual identity to resist the imposition of a master narrative and opt instead for maximum difference? How elastic can it be? How far can it stretch? What are the boundaries? And what is the thread that sows it all together?" Mau states "the answers mark a departure from modern identity programs and their list of do's and don'ts. this program, which consists entirely of do's, is an embrace of promiscuity." (Mau 242)

Driven by an ever increasing challenge to differentiate 'visual identity' against the backdrop of "louder" visual noise levels that ever before in history the Bruce Mau Design studio (BMD) created more than 100 logotypes. "The strategy we devised for NAi" Mau explains "was to create an identity that exists as a carrier or generic code, one level removed from specific applications. We made a mark that was a flat, characterless logo inscription. But it was never seen in its first generation form. Instead, using light, we papered the flat inscription onto 100 surfaces to produce an array of versions, each of them unique but legible. Then we borrowed one thousand colors from Gerhard Richter. In application the mark acts as a vector passing through a large set of variations, so that the logo blossoms anew in every instance it is used." (Mau 244)

The unique approach was conceptually underpinned by the opposite of a conventional rule applied in conventional logo design practice. "The history of identity has been shaped by the idea of subtraction, the process of cutting everything away that does not look like the identity. The NAi paper used an additive process, and this resulted in an identity that could be characterized as differences-within-consistency." (Mau 245)

By removing the identity form one level away from the level of application BMD introduced a point of inflection into the 'visual identity' design process which allowed it to be expressed in potentially infinite ways. This is a graphic example of changing the order of things in the same radical way Michel Foucault analysed in "The Order of Things".

The specific change BMD introduced is displacing the position at which the identity graphic which they produced functions in the representation of the 'visual identity' by not making it directly visible. The only visible versions of it were the indirect and projected versions of the visual identity onto irregular surfaces and textures, which allowed the it to be expressed in potentially infinite ways.

Conclusions

This project of Bruce Mau is an excellent example of changing modes of representation which have the potential to introduce significant discursive breaks in discourses. In this case, it achieved such innovation in a most elegant manner.

The rule that changed was not only that of deduction replaced by addition, but also the rule of direct material application which was changed to indirect non-material application. Another rule changed by this epistemic break was, the rule of light reflection which was changed to a rule of light emission for the primary visual identity element.

In this project Bruce Mau Design succeeded in making the same fundamental change to the concept of 'visual identity' that Foucault analysed in the last years of the eighteenth century. "A discontinuity as enigmatic in its principle, in its original rupture, as that which separates the Paracelsian circles from the Cartesian order." (Foucault 235-236)

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